

Tracking and Retention

Attacking the very real problem of low achievement with retention makes for more compelling political rhetoric than advocating more complex and costly strategies for quality education. Denigrating promotion by calling it social might do something for political campaigns, but it surely does nothing to improve schooling for the children who need it most.

Oakes, 2000

The fact is that neither social promotion nor retention alone can foster student success. Neither takes into consideration new insights regarding how students learn. Research on year-round schooling, ungraded primaries, and different uses of time in school suggest that the debate on social promotion is another example of how we are trying to make the practices of the early and mid-20th century work for the 21st century (National Association of State Boards of Education, 1999).

Retention should not be perpetuated on the basis of false assumptions as to its educational benefit to young children. Further, policies that delay children's entry into school and/or segregate them into extra-year classes label children as failures at the outset of their school experience and are simply more subtle forms of retention. Not only is there a preponderance of evidence that there is no academic benefit from retention or tracking in its many forms, especially for young elementary age children, but there are also worrisome threats to the social-emotional development of the child subjected to such practices.

Although research does not support grade retention, many educators and parents do. Sometimes it is true that teachers do see children who have been retained, placed in extra year classes, or held out of school for a year making progress. It is also true that they have no opportunity to see how well the children might have progressed had they been promoted or moved along with their age-mates. The vast majority of control-group studies that are structured to measure this comparison come down clearly on the side of promotion. Students recommended for retention but advanced to the next level end up doing as well as or better academically than comparable non-promoted peers. Children who have been retained demonstrate more social regression, display more behavior problems, suffer stress in connection with being retained, and more frequently leave high school without graduating.

Policies sanctioning retention should be highly suspect given the lack of demonstrated effectiveness and prevalent bias against certain groups of children (e.g., young-in-grade males, children of color, English language learners). The current methodology used in selecting students for retention or tracking makes it impossible to predict accurately or equitably who will benefit. Given the natural variability in children's developmental patterns in the early childhood years and the widely acknowledged unreliability of testing young children, it is unlikely that valid and reliable processes for determining who might benefit from being retained or otherwise held back can ever be applied with surety.

Pro-retention policies as a strategy for establishing rigorous academic standards are likely to be self-defeating. The lowered expectations parents and teachers develop toward

retained children decrease the probability that such children will ever attain their potential. Rhetoric around the term “ending social promotion” (which has increased dramatically in the standards-based climate of today’s schools) creates a climate that supports an increase in retention. The only circumstances under which it may be useful to urge the end of “social promotion” is when there is a clear understanding that we know many strategies for improving children’s achievement that we are not using fully and which are less costly in both human and financial terms than retention. These include:

- Participation in high quality preschool at age three and four
- Improving the quality of infant/toddler child care settings
- Participation in full time kindergarten
- Lowering class size
- Access to tutoring outside of class time
- Participation in summer programs and/or year-round schooling
- Participation in after school programs
- Multiage grouping/looping/ungraded primary
- Professional development designed to institutionalize more effective teaching practices

The educational community can no longer afford to ignore the consequences of policies and practices which: 1) assign the burden of responsibility for failure to the child, rather than the program; 2) place the child at risk of further failure, apathy toward school, and demoralization; and 3) fail to contribute to quality early childhood education. Ending conditions that prevent all children from learning the most they can must be a priority for us all (National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in the State Departments of Education, 1987).

References:

- National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education. (1987). *Unacceptable trends in kindergarten entry and placement*. Washington, DC: Author.
- National Association of State Boards of Education. (1999). Social promotion and retention of students. *NASBE Policy Update*, 7(3) 1-2.
- Oakes, J. (1999). Promotion or retention: Which one is social? *Harvard Education Letter*, January/February, pp. 1-2.